

# NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## 1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Charlotte County Courthouse

Other Name/Site Number:

## 2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Charlotte County Court Square, intersection of  
State Routes 40 and 47

Not for publication:

City/Town: Charlotte Court House

Vicinity:

State: VA

County: Charlotte

Code: 037

Zip Code: 23923

## 3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: ☐

Public-Local: ☐

Public-State: ☒

Public-Federal: ☐

Category of Property

Building(s): ☒

District: ☐

Site: ☐

Structure: ☐

Object: ☐

Number of Resources within Property

THE NEW CLERK'S OFFICE IS ONE OF THE TWO THE NONCONTRIB BLDGS LISTED BELOW. THE OTHER IS THE STORAGE BUILDING BEHIND THE JAIL. I HAVEN'T YET LISTED THE 3<sup>RD</sup> NONCONTRIBUTING ELEMENT, THE NEW GAZEBO BCS I DON'T KNOW WHETHER IT IS A BUILDING., A STRUCTURE, OR WHAT.

Contributing

5

1

1

7

Noncontributing

2 buildings

0 sites

0 structures

0 objects

2 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

Jeffersonian Courthouse NHL Thematic Nomination Project

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Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Government: Courthouse

Sub:

Current: Government: Courthouse

Sub:

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: Early Republic: Early Classical Revival

Materials: Brick, wood, stone

Foundation: Brick

Walls: Brick

Roof: Standing seam metal

Other:

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

**Summary**

The present nomination deals with only the Charlotte County Courthouse Square, not with the larger Charlotte Court House Historic District. The County Courthouse of 1821-23 consists of a well-preserved exterior and a deceptively rebuilt interior. On the exterior, Jefferson's standards for the ideal courthouse shine forth: a temple-shaped body, construction of enduring masonry with red brick exposed in accordance with Virginia custom, and a monumental display of a Classical Order. On the interior, vestiges of the traditional courthouse plan that Jefferson embraced show through the effects of two remodelings that have created a pseudo-Jeffersonian hall of justice.

**Exterior**

Jefferson's Charlotte County Courthouse rises from the crest of a low knoll. This two-story building approximates the effect of a Classical temple, but one composed in an un-Roman fashion of red Virginia brick and white-painted trim. Specifically the courthouse imitates a prostyle temple, a temple with a freestanding portico on the entry front. This porch stands on a platform that in front rises as a single freestone step to a height of 6" above the current ground level, with the relation to the ground varying at the sides. Illustrations of the courthouse published in 1889 and 1907 suggest that the platform never stood much higher.<sup>1</sup> The portico floor has been relaid with twentieth-century plain and embossed brick within the original margins formed by the steps—a margin of freestone on the front, as already noted, and of granite or gneiss on the sides. The porch is a four-column or tetrastyle Tuscan portico. The columns, largely painted white and resting on subplinths of granite or gneiss, consist of freestone plinths painted gray; irregularly shaped masonry bases covered with stucco or cement; shafts of stucco or cement over a masonry core, presumably brick; and crisp freestone capitals. The columns carry a wooden entablature that runs around the entire courthouse. Above are a wooden pediment with a lunette window, adorned with tracery but boarded over, flanked by twin oblong louvered openings, under a gabled standing seam metal roof. The portico ceiling sits roughly at the level of the cornice, leaving the inner surfaces of the naively thin architrave and frieze visible. The builder, John Percival, did not follow Jefferson's preference for using the version of Andrea Palladio's Tuscan Order that Palladio's seventeenth-century disciple Fréart de Chambray had codified. Instead, the Order follows a series of derivatives of Palladio.

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The coarse bases derive from a Tuscan model set by the sixteenth-century British Palladian Inigo Jones; the shafts, at 7.7 diameters, materially exceed Palladio's and Vitruvius' rule of 7 diameters for the Tuscan and partake of Adamesque elongation; and the entablature follows an adaptation of Palladio's Tuscan published by the sometime American Adamite Asher Benjamin. The rectangular body of the courthouse has walls of brick, of Flemish bond across the three-bay front. That façade has regularly spaced openings, with a central door of one leaf in six panels under a four-light transom, and early twelve-over-twelve sash under eight-over-twelve sash on the second story. The lower apertures have chiseled freestone sills, the upper have wooden sills, all are framed with simple architraves, and the windows are hung with dark green louvered shutters. Beside the front door hang two twentieth-century glass-doored bulletin boards that are kept locked. The wall is pocked on either side of the entry as far as the windows with a constellation of holes and sometimes nails left from earlier methods of posting notices. An old bell of unknown date, its yoke marked "NO. 22" and "YOKE," hangs from the entablature soffit between the central two columns. Its housing has been moved at least once, leaving ghosts on the architrave. It is rung by a cord that loops onto an I-hook in the column east of center.

The lower courses of brick on the slightly irregular east and west flanks have been coated with cement. The apertures of these flanks match those of the front, including the side door in the middle bay of each of these walls. The east flank brickwork is in an irregular Liverpool bond, and there is a recent handicap ramp of brick with a metal rail. Visibly different brickwork and the heads of two tension rods reveal where the south end of the building was extended in 1852-54 into a solid rectangle, replacing Jefferson's arrangement of a semi-octagonal apse within a rectangular arcade. The Flemish bond of the main front continues on the highly visible west flank along Route 47 (Le Grande Avenue). Settlement cracks show up in the flanks toward the south end, those between the fourth and fifth bays from the front, with their tie rods, again identifying where the building was extended in 1852-54. The altered south façade, of American common bond, has three major Greek-Revival-vintage apertures, presumably dating from the extension. At either side this wall has a door under a panel and a twelve-light fixed sash, hung with shutters, as well as modern concrete steps and metal railings. Between these entrances the wall opens into a large three-part window with a stone sill pieced together from sills from earlier openings. Above the entablature, the pediment holds a boarded up wooden rosette adapted from an earlier window. Still higher up and north of the edge of the roof rises the sole chimney.

**Interior**

The courtroom space currently consists of an oblong hall with a modern brick floor, a gallery on the north, and the Bench on the south. The gallery rests on a freestanding Order of attenuated Adamesque wooden Doric columns, which are twentieth-century replacements. These columns were inserted in the remodeling devised by the Richmond firm of Ballou and Justice in 1961, and they were marbleized in 1992 when the courthouse was used as the set for a Tennessee courtroom for the Warner Brothers film Sommersby. These replacement columns carry the original Tuscan gallery entablature, which survived the 1852-54 remodeling, and which derives from Palladio's Tuscan profiles via modifications by James Gibbs and Asher Benjamin. A pair of partly rebuilt original staircases winds up on the original plan into the gallery, which is now open. This area originally consisted of a large jury room on the east and a smaller jury room on the west, reputedly once separated by a movable partition, and later converted into three rooms, very likely in 1852-54. The gallery holds seven juror's chairs marked by the Sikes Company of Buffalo, four unmarked juror's chairs, and a group of unlabeled Victorian benches. The board ceiling over the main courtroom space is a twentieth-century addition fastened to a plaster ceiling. On the south side of the courtroom, the wall behind the Bench has been moved forward or north to fit in the judge's chambers, a holding room, a jury room, and toilets. Boldly eared Greek Revival frames from the 1852-54 remodeling survive around the north apertures. The Bench, its paneling, and the indeterminate entablature encircling the upper wall are Colonial Revival, devised by the Richmond firm of Ballou and Justice. The twelve early twentieth-century fixed, swiveling, and tilting jurors's chairs are labeled underneath as the work of the B. L. Marble Chair Company of Bedford, Ohio. The furnishings further

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include more unlabeled Victorian wooden benches and five Italian marble busts of good and bad Roman emperors, largely on pedestals, the gift of David K. E. Bruce, the Charlotte County diplomat.

The Courthouse Square also contains the brick Greek Revival clerk's office of 1840, now the Charlotte County General District Court Clerk's Office; the "fireproof" late Italianate brick clerk's office of 1900; the granite and marble Confederate Monument of 1901; the brick Federal Revival jail of 1936, now the Museum of Charlotte County; the brick registrar's office of the 1940s, now the Adult Probation and Parole Office; and the town water tank of ca. 1940, making the square one of the best preserved county government complexes in the Commonwealth. Joining the historic contents of the square are a late twentieth-century brick storage building behind the former jail and a new Tuscan Revival gazebo of brick and wood east of the Courthouse. Immediately adjacent to the historic courthouse square to the east, the Brick Tavern of 1820 has recently been enlarged with a southern wing by the architectural firm of DASA of Charlottesville to hold the latest clerk's office, an undertaking not quite complete in 2003.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_ Locally: \_\_

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A\_\_ B\_\_ C X D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A\_\_ B\_\_ C\_\_ D\_\_ E\_\_ F\_\_ G

NHL Criteria: Criterion 4 – FILL IN

NHL Theme(s): Shaping the Political Landscape

Areas of Significance: Political

Period(s) of Significance: 1823-1954

Significant Dates: 1821-23

Significant Person(s): Thomas Jefferson

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: Thomas Jefferson, architect; John Percival, builder

Historic Contexts:

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

### Summary

The Charlotte County Courthouse is one of two Jefferson edifices that demonstrably set the pattern for the Jeffersonian reform of courthouse architecture in Virginia. The building encapsulates the strengths and weaknesses of Jefferson's reform: the plan from established usage, the masonry construction owing to both Virginia and Palladio, the temple casing, and monumental Order. At the same time, the Charlotte County building draws attention to Jefferson's inability to vanquish the Adamesque taste and his limitations with integrating a civic bell into a portico.

### Statement of Significance

At the Charlotte County Courthouse one can so vividly see Jefferson's architectural reform campaign at work that it is almost as if the events were unfolding before one's eyes. Jefferson had just set a model for the reform of Virginia civic architecture at the Buckingham County Courthouse of 1822-23, and this exemplar swayed the Charlotte County building commissioners to want a highly similar building to replace their ignoble wooden courthouse. It appears that the commissioners acquired some version of Jefferson's generic plan, whether Jefferson drew it afresh or they got the drawing sent to Buckingham. Charlotte County built an edifice that embraced all the leading traits of Jefferson's program: the established apsed-and-galleried plan; the durable masonry construction that framed that plan and included both red Virginia brick walls and stuccoed masonry columns alla Palladio; the temple-like shape of the containing masonry; and the noble display of an Order. John Percival is not documented as one of the University of Virginia builders, but the University models molded the Charlotte County conception. Specifically, the mildly elevated platform is closer to the ground-level Jefferson-Latrobe "temples" on the Lawn at the University of Virginia than to the provisions of Jefferson's model design, K214-215. In turn, the Charlotte County restatement of Jefferson's themes immediately and expressly set the pattern for the Lunenburg County Courthouse (although not in respect to a low platform).

At the same time, the Charlotte County Courthouse betrays how Jefferson's models for the Orders rarely contended successfully with the Adamesque preferences of artisans, and, whatever the date of the Charlotte County bell, it reminds us that Jefferson set no model for integrating a civic bell into his architecture. Over the years Jefferson's conception has been blurred as two renovations have turned the interior into a pseudo-Jeffersonian courtroom. Nonetheless, despite these blemishes of execution and the substitution, the building has remained a commanding manifestation of the architecture of the law, as Jefferson wished.

### 9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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## Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.  
☒ Previously Listed in the National Register: VDHR#127-0042 (listed 4/17/1970)  
☐ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.  
☐ Designated a National Historic Landmark.  
☒ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: VA-113 / HABS, VA,44-RICH,2-  
☐ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record:

## Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office  
☒ Other State Agency: The Library of Virginia  
☐ Federal Agency  
☐ Local Government  
☐ University  
☒ Other (Specify Repository): The Virginia Historical Society

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

## Acreage of Property:

UTM References:      Zone      Easting      Northing

## Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundary description for the      is  
Goochland Tax Parcel Map Reference Number

## Boundary Justification:

These boundaries include the land historically associated with the Charlotte County Courthouse.

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Charles Brownell, Professor of Art History, Virginia Commonwealth University (with thanks to Dr. Robert A. Carter, Bryan Clark Green, and Calder Loth of the VDHR; Stuart B. Fallen, Clerk, Circuit Court, Charlotte County; Dr. Delos D. Hughes, Professor Emeritus, Department of Politics, Washington and Lee University; and Erika S. A. Moore, graduate student, and Craig A. Reynolds, Bess T. Brownell Assistant in Architectural History, Department of Art History, Virginia Commonwealth University).

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NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS SURVEY  
February 3, 2004

**Endnotes**

1. Admittedly the platform is obscured in both the illustrations. For the 1889 view, an engraving after a photograph, see p. 10 of William H. Gaines, Jr., "Courthouses of Bedford and Charlotte Counties," Virginia Cavalcade 21 (Summer 1971):4-13. For the later view see J. Cullen Carrington, comp., Charlotte County, Virginia: Historical, Statistical, and Present Attractions (1907; reprint, Charlotte Courthouse: n. p., 1996), 22.